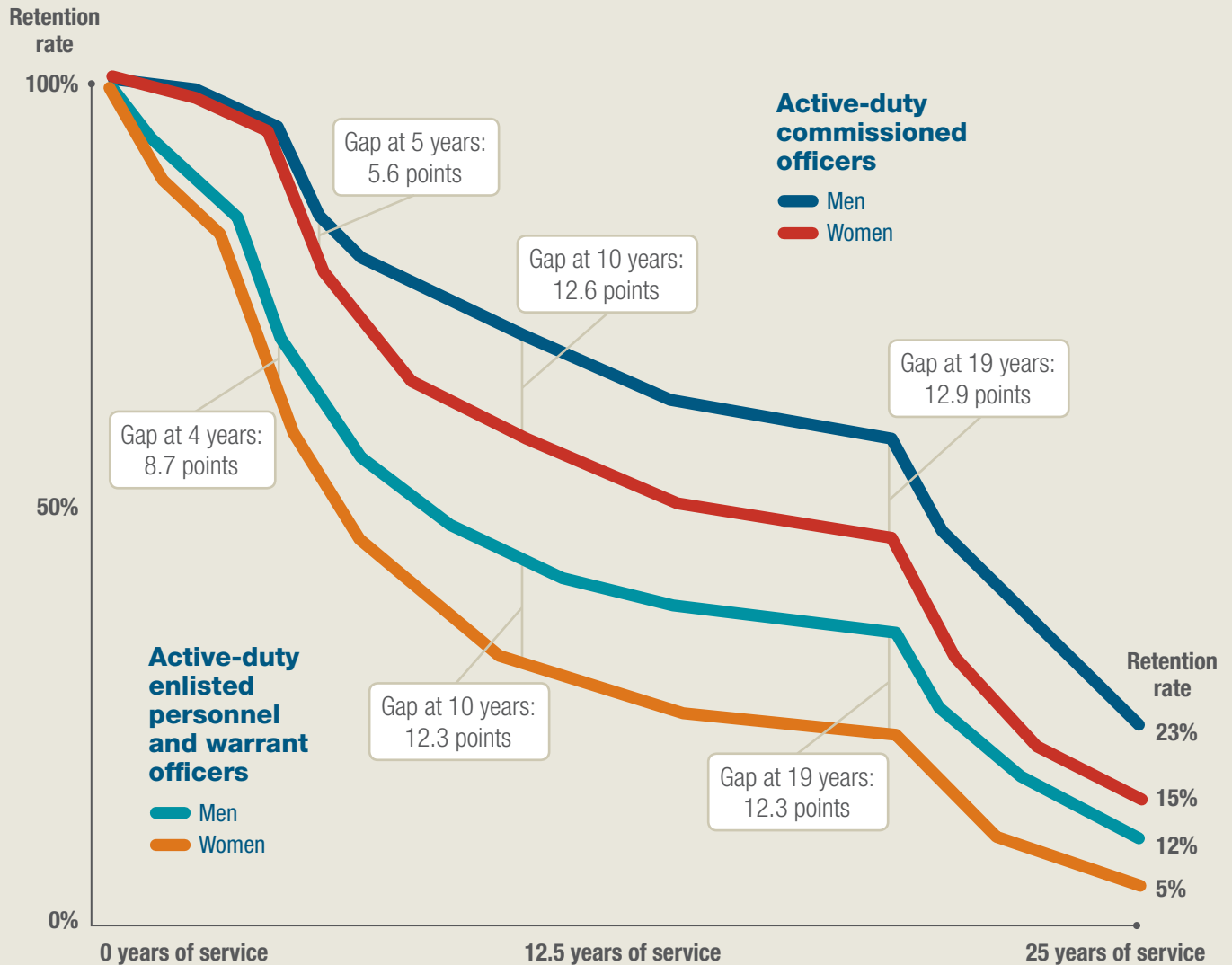


Why Do Women Leave the Coast Guard, and What Can Be Done to Encourage Them to Stay?



The U.S. Coast Guard's *Human Capital Strategy* and its *Diversity and Inclusion Strategic Plan 2015–2018* state that the Coast Guard “will attract, recruit, and retain a workforce from all segments of American society to create a high-performing 21st century workforce.” A key part of this objective is the advancement and retention of women in the Coast Guard. However, despite high retention rates overall compared with those in the other military services, the data indicate that the Coast Guard still retains women at a lower rate than it retains men. This gap exists for both officers and enlisted members, with cumulative retention gaps between men and women emerging in the first ten years of service and then stabilizing.

The Coast Guard retains women at a lower rate than men (fiscal years 2005 to 2016)



A key objective of the U.S. Coast Guard's *Human Capital Strategy* and its *Diversity and Inclusion Strategic Plan 2015–2018* is the advancement and retention of women in the Coast Guard. The data, however, show that the Coast Guard retains women at a lower rate than it retains men, a gap that exists for both officers and enlisted members, with cumulative retention gaps between men and women emerging in the first ten years of service and then stabilizing.

What the Coast Guard Asked the Homeland Security Operational Analysis Center to Do

The last large-scale study that the Coast Guard sponsored on women's issues took place in 1990, leaving a gap in current understanding of the issues that women in the Coast Guard might face today that influence their retention decisions. To help develop a better understanding of current issues in retaining women, the U.S. Coast Guard Office of Diversity and Inclusion requested that the Homeland Security Operational Analysis Center (HSOAC) conduct a study to do the following:

- **Identify the root causes** for attrition of women in the Coast Guard.
- **Develop recommendations** that will help mitigate identified barriers to retaining women in the Coast Guard.

The study authors used several methods in their approach. A *statistical analysis*, which examined Coast Guard personnel data, offered insight into gender differences in retention and whether certain characteristics help explain those differences. The authors also reviewed *relevant previous studies* and benchmarked *documented retention trends* in the civilian sector and the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD). Finally, HSOAC researchers held numerous *focus groups* with active-duty women in the Coast Guard. The focus groups provided insight for a better understanding of potential barriers to retaining women. In addition, the focus groups included a sample of active-duty men to aid further understanding of men's reasons for deciding to leave; these male focus groups served as a comparison for identifying factors that were unique to women or seemed to affect women to a greater degree and those factors that were common to both genders.

DoD and the Civilian Sector Show Similar Trends

A review of documented retention trends in DoD military services reveals a similar gender gap in retention, although the Coast Guard has higher retention overall than other services. Data on civilian-sector retention are lacking, but statistics show that women are not always well represented at higher levels in many civilian occupations. In addition, women in the civilian sector face “push” (e.g., disparities in promotion potential) and “pull” factors (e.g., work-life balance concerns) similar to those identified for women in the Coast Guard.



164

focus groups with female members in ten locations

- Air Station Detroit
- Base Alameda
- Base Boston
- Base Honolulu
- Base Miami Beach
- Base Portsmouth
- Base Seattle
- Sector Houston–Galveston
- Sector Juneau
- Coast Guard headquarters

1,010

female participants

- Roughly 17% of active-duty female members
- Officers and enlisted members across ranks
- Representation across specialties and ratings
- Representation across marital and parental statuses

Understanding Women’s Concerns: Lessons from the Focus Groups

Challenges to retaining women in the Coast Guard coalesced around three topics: work environment, career issues, and personal life–related matters. In this section are highlights of the concerns in each of these areas that were raised during the focus groups with female Coast Guard members. Also noted are factors that resonated with men about male retention in the Coast Guard.

WORK ENVIRONMENT CONCERNS

Leadership

Female participants cited experiences with poor leadership as a key reason women leave the Coast Guard. Concerns included perceptions that bad leaders are retained and even promoted; that male leaders are reluctant to mentor women; and that leaders were unaware of Coast Guard policies, particularly female-specific policies, or interpreted or implemented these policies inconsistently. Participants also indicated a desire for more female leaders to act as role models and mentors. Leadership also resonated with male focus groups as a retention factor but slightly less than with female focus groups.

Gender Bias and Discrimination

Female focus group participants cited gender bias and discrimination as a strong contributor to women’s decisions to leave the Coast Guard. Female participants expressed the belief that men and women were treated differently; that women had to work twice as hard as men to prove themselves; and that men often did not trust their opinions or value the quality of their work, particularly in male-dominated ratings or specialties. Some women also perceived an “old boys’ club” culture from which they felt excluded or that they had to tolerate inappropriate comments. Some reported male peers avoiding them or actively excluding them from activities, resulting in feeling a lack of camaraderie. Conversely, some reported that, when a woman does interact with male peers, she can be subjected to rumors of engaging in a sexual relationship, with any stigma being placed on her, not him. Notably, although gender bias and discrimination were not factors in retaining men, male focus group participants acknowledged that those could be reasons that women choose to leave the Coast Guard.

Weight Standards

Although male participants did not raise this concern, female participants cited stress related to perceived unfairness of weight standards, arguing that those standards do not take into account different body types and body changes after childbirth. They noted as particularly problematic the use of the taping process as a measure of body fat to enforce weight standards. Furthermore, participants felt that standards were not aligned to job ability.

Sexual Harassment and Assault

Female participants raised sexual harassment and assault as concerns that influence retention. Some participants commented that they feared being assaulted while underway and noted that units with only one or two women assigned and units in remote, isolated environments also tended to experience sexual harassment or assault more often than other units. Participants reported that such incidents can cause women to separate from the Coast Guard. Although male participants did not raise sexual harassment and assault as factors for retaining men, they mentioned those issues as factors that might influence women's retention decisions.

Workload and Resource Issues

Both female and male focus group participants reported feelings of being understaffed and overworked, leading to burnout and work-life balance issues. In addition to lowering morale, participants suggested, this lack of resources can lead members to seek employment in an organization they feel would be more supportive.

CAREER CONCERNS

Advancement

Female focus groups cited issues with advancement, including the perception of bias in subjective evaluations, as influencing decisions. Furthermore, participants noted that berthing restrictions for women can limit opportunities. Some women also said that they are routinely assigned collateral duties that are stereotypically female activities and that are less likely to support career development. The male focus groups raised the importance of advancement opportunities to an even greater degree than female groups did.

Assignments

Female participants raised concerns about assignments, reporting that they found the process of working with detailers unpredictable and frustrating and that receiving assignments to undesired locations can drive women out. Such undesired locations include those far from family or those that are remote, especially if women are not assigned with other women. Although the male groups also raised the issue of assignments, they were mixed in their responses as to whether it would have a significant influence on retention.

Civilian Opportunities

Focus groups cited better civilian prospects—including the perception of higher salaries and no underway requirements that require them to be gone for extended periods of time—as reasons women leave the Coast Guard. Participants also described a perception that civilian workplaces would have fewer gender-related climate or culture issues. Male focus groups discussed to an even greater degree the influence that civilian opportunities have on their retention decisions.





PERSONAL LIFE CONCERNS

Family was viewed as an essential factor in many retention decisions, with some women in the focus groups saying they felt that, at some point in their careers, they would be forced to choose between the Coast Guard and family.

Spouses

Across focus groups, women indicated that spouses were a key factor in retention decisions, although considerations varied based on whether the spouse was civilian or military. Those with civilian spouses raised concerns about frequent moves that affect the spouse's employment and a perceived lack of support from the Coast Guard community for husbands.¹ Those with military spouses pointed to challenges with being assigned to different locations or locations that are in proximity but require a significant commute to live together and difficulties in managing two successful military careers. Notably, roughly 52 percent of married Coast Guard women are married to active-duty service members, far more than the 7 percent of married Coast Guard men in dual-military marriages. Male focus group participants raised similar concerns about spouses' importance in their decisions.

Children

A key issue for women was the impact that extended deployments, frequent transfers, and work requirements (e.g., standing watch overnight) have on their children. These concerns were magnified especially when both parents were active duty and there was the potential for competing schedules. Another recurrent theme was the difficulty of finding quality, affordable child care, especially that could accommodate the demands of a Coast Guard career (e.g., available at the last minute, overnight, or for extended periods). Male participants raised many of the same themes that women did regarding children. However, some men viewed their wives as being responsible for child care; therefore, some men did not view children as affecting their retention decisions.

Pregnancy and Breastfeeding

Participants reported feeling that they had to time their pregnancies or delay starting families to maintain their Coast Guard careers. For example, certain specialties and ratings (e.g., pilots, those that include working with chemicals or require going underway) necessitate certain qualifications and experiences, and opportunities to gain those can be affected by restrictions while pregnant, as well as by parental leave following the arrival of a child. Women also perceived a general stigma toward women from colleagues—mainly male—frustrated at having to fill in when women are on parental leave. In addition, women described being accused of getting pregnant just to get out of duties or having to go underway. Participants also raised concerns about a lack of breastfeeding support, including a lack of appropriate facilities and the reluctance of some commanders to allow proper breaks for pumping breast milk. Although these were not themes

¹ Our discussions of spouses did include same-sex partners and spouses. However, we did not hear unique themes related to having a same-sex spouse or partner.

brought up within the male focus groups, some men did comment that they were aware that, for women, these issues influence retention.

Other Personal Life Factors

Female participants, particularly those who were not married and did not have children, also raised several other issues, but these were discussed with less frequency across groups. These included concerns about needing to provide increasing care for aging parents, challenges in developing friendships and having a support network, and difficulties dating because of frequent moves and underway requirements.

AN ANALYSIS OF COAST GUARD PERSONNEL DATA

A complementary analysis of U.S. Coast Guard personnel data shows that some underlying differences in the career and personnel characteristics of Coast Guard women and men appear to contribute to the gender differences in retention, in that portions of the retention gap could be related to differences in occupations, deployment tempo, and family status:

- A plurality of enlisted women work in service or support ratings, followed by operational ratings and engineering ratings, while prevalence among enlisted men is the reverse. For women, service and support ratings have the highest retention, and operational ratings the lowest. On the other hand, men's average retention levels hardly vary in the three rating categories.
- For officer occupations, men have more than triple the likelihood of being pilots than women have, and pilots have substantially higher retention rates than other officers have.
- Men are more likely than women to be afloat, and those in the afloat sector consistently have higher retention than the ashore sector for both men and women. Furthermore, for enlisted members, sea time on cutters other than the high-endurance vessels (378s and National Security Cutters) was particularly limited for women.
- The indicators of family status show that women were less likely than men to be married or have children while in the Coast Guard, which also contributes to retention gaps. However, the fact that members make decisions regarding whether to get married or have children in conjunction with retention decisions (e.g., might choose to separate in order to have children) makes cause-and-effect relationships between family status and retention difficult to determine.

Although the analysis of personnel data highlighted some potential contributors to the retention gap, the personnel data analyzed cannot explain most of the retention gap. The analysis was limited by the data available, as well as by the ability to quantify some of the retention factors identified in the focus groups and the complexity of the decisionmaking process.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Findings indicate that there is no “silver-bullet” solution and multiple factors influence Coast Guard women’s retention decisions. The study team proposes a series of recommendations for initiatives aimed at collectively improving female retention in the Coast Guard and addressing barriers contributing to the retention gender gap. These recommended initiatives are intended to address concerns from all female members, regardless of marital or parental status, to the extent possible. Additionally, the recommendations are intended to have broad-reaching effects, addressing retention factors across genders in some cases. The proposed initiatives fall into three overarching categories of recommendations, detailed in the rest of this section.

1

Update Coast Guard Personnel Management Systems to Better Meet the Needs of the Coast Guard’s Current and Future Workforce

Explore Options to Augment Unit Human Capital During Parental Leave

To address and diminish the stigma women often face related to being away from their units leading up to and during parental leave,² the authors recommend two options for the Coast Guard to explore to augment units with additional manpower during parental leave or, if necessary in certain circumstances, during pregnancy:

- Leverage support from reserve members through Active Duty for Operational Support, allowing available reservists to temporarily augment a unit while members are on parental leave, including limited medical duty beforehand if applicable, so that the unit manpower levels will remain the same.
- Explore supplementing units by allowing members to transition to Temporary Limited Duty status during parental leave, opening up the member’s billet for another member to fill during parental leave.

One of these options might be more appropriate than another in different situations. Therefore, the authors recommend that these be options for which units can apply based on workload and existing manpower resources.

Explore Options to Minimize Parental Leave’s Impact on Evaluations and Promotions

To address the perception that pregnancy and parental leave following the arrival of a child could negatively affect female members’ evaluations and promotion potential, the authors recommend several promotion flexibilities that the Coast Guard could offer to ensure that advancement opportunities are fair and that women are not inadvertently penalized for having children:

- Allow members to choose to extend their evaluation periods in situations in which they feel that parental leave or pregnancy restrictions will cause their evaluation reports to suffer substantially.

² The Coast Guard’s parental leave policy covers both maternity convalescent leave following the arrival of a child and caregiver leave for primary and secondary caregivers.

- Allow members to extend their current assignments to give them time in the unit equivalent to the amount of time other members have to complete qualification requirements.
- Allow members to choose to delay their promotion windows to account for time away for parental leave following the arrival of a child or pregnancy restrictions.

Continue to Explore Ways to Improve Child Care Options

Finding child care can be particularly difficult in more-remote locations, and most child care does not accommodate care overnight or for the extended periods often associated with Coast Guard duties:

- Develop a centralized information repository that Coast Guard members can access that includes information on local child care options that members have used in the past, including day-care centers, babysitters, and nannies in the local area. The information repository could be managed by regional family resource specialists, who already try to collect this type of information, in coordination with ombudsmen and spouse groups, but it should allow members to input information directly so that they can share their experiences and resources with others.

Consider Modifying the Weight and Body Fat Standards Program to Minimize Potential Negative Impacts on Female Members

Women perceived inequities with the current Coast Guard Weight and Body Fat Standards Program and raised concerns regarding body fat measurement through taping:

- Reevaluate and consider modifying the current weight standards, assessing the objectives of the Weight and Body Fat Standards Program and aligning the standards accordingly.
- Explore alternative measures (e.g., waist circumference, physical fitness test option, fitness-fatness index) to replace or augment current standards to address perceptions of gender equity and promote accurate measurements aligned to the program objectives.

Continue to Explore Creative Solutions to Berthing Limitations for Women

The authors recognize that the Coast Guard is making strides to convert berthing facilities to include mixed-gender options and incorporate mixed-gender berthing into new assets. However, women suggested that there is still room for improvement to achieve equal opportunity for assignments that meet sea-time requirements often needed for advancement or promotion:

- Continue to explore creative solutions to limitations to berthing for women (e.g., more-flexible privacy options for boats without permanent physical barriers in place) with the goal of making all assets mixed gender. This could also help address personnel data analysis findings that enlisted women have limited opportunities on cutters other than high-endurance vessels and provide broader opportunities for women in the afloat community.

2

Develop and Implement a Communication Plan to Ensure That All Members Are Aware of Relevant Policies and Priorities, and Strengthen Leadership Education to Foster Inclusive Work Environments

Communicate and Educate Leaders and Members on Female-Specific Coast Guard Policies

According to female members, Coast Guard leaders might be unaware of or unfamiliar with female-specific Coast Guard policies (e.g., lactation breaks, grooming standards for women), despite the service's efforts to put these policies in place, leading to inconsistent policy implementation:

- Develop a communication and education plan for leaders that ensures that leaders are fully aware of and understand female-relevant policies and emphasizes the importance of adherence to these policies. This communication and education plan should be implemented in a manner that does not contribute to additional bias toward female members.
- Clearly communicate female-relevant policies to all members, and make those policies readily available for female members to access and review.

Expand Opportunities for Comprehensive Coast Guard Leadership Development Training

- Expand mandatory leadership development training, including more-frequent development training throughout a member's career and for longer periods of time.
- Training can help to inculcate leadership core competencies, emphasize the need to support subordinates' work-life balance along with achieving the mission, and create an inclusive unit climate that is a positive environment for all members and that addresses negative work environment factors that women identified as influencing their retention decisions.
- Leadership training should emphasize the importance of mentoring other members and, in particular, reaching out to junior female members.

Emphasize to Assignment Officers the Importance of Assignment Policies Designed to Meet the Needs of Members' Personal Lives

Because women still cite assignment process outcomes as unfavorable, despite existing relevant assignment policies, it is unclear how often these policies are implemented or when the service's needs prevail:

- Continue to emphasize policies that support collocation, geographic stability, and other personal and family life considerations, and direct assignment officers to prioritize these policies whenever possible.
- Increase the transparency of the assignment process so that members better understand assignment outcomes and how their preferences and personal life needs were considered in that process.

Promote Accountability and Monitor Effectiveness by Establishing and Tracking Relevant Metrics

3

Continue to Monitor Retention Trends and Track Reasons for Attrition

- Continue to examine basic gender differences in retention trends, including potential differences within specialties or ratings that might exist. As the Coast Guard moves forward with various initiatives designed to address retention and minimize the gender gap, these trends will be important to monitor and to assess whether they are having the intended impact.
- Continue to examine and track reasons for attrition from the Coast Guard through the Career Intentions Survey and exit surveys. This is important to being able to monitor trends and the impact that changes in policies and programs can have on retention intentions. Importantly, the efforts to track retention intentions and reasons for attrition on exit surveys must remain consistent over time.

Ensure Workforce Data Track Relevant Variables in a Comprehensive Manner

The quantitative analysis was limited by the available Coast Guard workforce data and could have explored additional factors if these variables had been present in the data set:

- Make efforts to track workforce data elements that have been identified as potential barriers to retention. These data elements might currently be available in snapshot form, but, to assess their effects on retention over time, they must be tracked such that they can be measured over time.



NEXT STEPS FOR THE COAST GUARD

In 2018, the Coast Guard established the Personnel Readiness Task Force to address challenges affecting the mission-ready total workforce, with a key focus on recruiting and retaining women in the Coast Guard. As part of its charter, the task force is responsible for evaluating and implementing the authors' recommendations, with a final implementation transition plan and final report expected in 2020.

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